

## THE EVENING WORLD'S COMPLETE NOVELETTE

## ON THE STAIRS

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## A MAN, A GIRL - A DIRTY, ILL-TEMPERED CAT

It was an ugly cat.

It stood at the top of the dark staircase, its arched back and bristling hair silhouetted against the yellow gaslight that shed a dismal glare from the one small jet on the narrow landing, over the worn stair-carpet from which all trace of pattern had long since vanished, and flickered over the ugly wallpaper, the original color of which was almost obliterated by dirty finger-marks and jagged scratches.

The yellow eyes of the cat looked— in the half-light—like miniature red-hot spheres of the gas jet, only more beautiful, and the girl, dragging her tired feet wearily up the steep stairs, paused involuntarily as she met their gaze. As her eyes grew more accustomed to the ill-lit darkness, she distinguished the outline of the cat's body and smiled.

"Poor puss!" she said. She held an inviting hand to the outline. She had only been one day in the third-rate boarding house, or she would have known that the poor wretch on the top stairs, shabby except in every line of its thin body, had too often yielded to the invitation of coaxing hands and been deceived to evince any particular friendliness now.

The arched back grew even more sharply defined; the coarse hair seemed to bristle still more, while cunning crept into the yellow eyes.

It reminded the girl of the face of a woman she had once seen—a woman whom trouble and lack of love had forced to regard the whole world with enmity, to believe the hand of every one to be against her.

Tired as she was, something humorous in the comparison appealed to the girl and she smiled.

"Poor old woman!" she said gently, and going up another stair stroked the cat's head.

After the first start of nervous shivering, the poor thing seemed absolutely bewildered to find that the inevitable cuff or kick was not going to follow; then, with a pitiful little noise, as if of deprecation, it wiggled its ugly head again into the girl's soft palm.

"Poor old woman!" she said again, and this time there was nothing but tenderness in her voice.

She put down the parcel she had been carrying, and sat down on the top stair beside the cat.

Two wails! A girl—shabby, hungry, footsore—and a cat—ugly, half-starved, and friendless; merely tolerated in its wretched home, if "home" it could be called, because it was glad to appease its hunger by killing the few stray mice who were foolish enough to appear on the premises in search of food.

NATURE had intended the cat to be white, but it had long since forgotten the fact, and had been busy trying to make anything approaching a toilet, till now it was an unwholesome, rusty sort of drab-gray, with a thin, wretched tail, and long, absurd whiskers.

It was a quiet time of evening at the boarding house.

Far away—in the street—the noise of traffic sounded blurred; and downstairs—in the regions where the machinery of the shabby house grinded out an existence—a hard, shrill voice floated up the staircase, mingled with the savor of cabbage water and soap.

The cat had climbed into the girl's lap now, and was fawning over her hands, emitting a rusty kind of rumbling sound that had once, doubtless, been a purr, but which had long since been thrown out of tune by disease; and so they remained, these two friendless creatures, till the noise of a door opening on the half-landing above roused them both.

The girl started, and the cat, ceasing in its pitiful attempts to purr, was once more on the defensive.

A man stood on the landing above, looking down at them.

He was a fine-looking enough man, if width of muscle and length of limb counted for anything; but there was a don't-care defiance about his face and whole personality that struck one somehow rather unpleasantly.

"What the—?" he began irritably, and broke off.

The girl rose to her feet, picking up the parcel.

She had forgotten the cat, and made a movement to pass the man and continue her way up the shabby, steep stairs to her room on the floor above.

As she passed him, he moved impatiently aside, for the landing was narrow.

"Thank you," said the girl, she raised her eyes to his face for the second second, and met the hard, uninterested stare of a pair of blue eyes; as she passed on quickly, once more conscious of her weary feet.

She had not gone more than a dozen steps when the sound of a scuffle arrested her—followed by the fall of some heavy object and an animal whine of pain or anger.

She stopped, listening, and suddenly remembered the cat, and the ugly, soft head that had snuggled so comfortably into her hand.

She turned and went swiftly back down the few stairs to the half-landing.

The young man was there, and the ugly cat—crouching away from him in the furthest corner.

Not a yard away a heavy book lay with its pages scattered on the floor.

"What are you doing?"

"It's that beast of a cat," he explained; "I hate the thing! It prowls round the house and into my room; she's a thief!" He broke off, his eyes twinkling. "I threw a book at her," he added, "but she was very meanly thing to do, certainly," said the girl cuttingly.

"And as to the cat being a thief,

perhaps you would be the same if you were half-starved."

"I am—occasionally," said the man dryly.

The girl looked at him scornfully; then she stooped and lifted the cat in her arms.

The young man watched till the bend hid them, then he picked up the book and went back to his own room, banging the door behind him.

THEY met on the stairs the following evening.

It had been raining hard, and the girl's dress was heavy with water; drops still dripped from the brim of her hat.

The man was just coming down the stairs, buttoned up to his throat in a shabby mackintosh, preparatory to braving the elements.

After the first glance the girl averted her head, but the man blocked the way.

"I haven't thrown any more books," he submitted.

"Please allow me to pass," said the girl icily.

There was a second's hesitation, then the big, mackintoshed figure was pressed against the dirty wallpaper in stiff dignity.

"If you gather your skirts together tightly," said its owner with sarcasm, "I think you can manage to squeeze by without touching me."

The faintest ghost of a smile twisted the girl's lips, and she was instantly repressed, but she did as he suggested, and went on her way.

She thought of the bare room awaiting her with a shudder.

Home!—the only home she had!—a miserable top bed-sitting room, furnished with bare necessities.

She pushed open the door of the room reluctantly, its hinges yielding as if with rusty protest.

The little creak was followed by a soft thud on the floor within, and a faint "meow," as into the radius of light on the landing the ugly cat thrust itself.

"Old woman!" said the girl. She stooped and gathered the little creature in her arms. Its soft body somehow seemed to hold comfort; there was a welcome in the rusty purring.

The girl carried it with her into the cheerless room and shut the door.

The following morning, when the girl opened her door, the man was just passing it, on his way down the stairs.

He carried a large parcel which looked like manuscript beneath his arm, and he was whispering cheerfully.

The girl paused, with the door half open, waiting for him to pass.

He glanced at her, a half smile in his eyes; then he stopped.

"I haven't got the plague, you know," he said whimsically. "And it seems that we are bound to come across each other, so couldn't you manage to say 'Good morning' sometimes, or 'Good evening,' or whatever time these endless days it is?"

The girl looked at him steadily. "I don't know you," she said; "and I don't care for people who ill-treat dumb animals."

For a moment he looked puzzled, then he laughed—a laugh of genuine amusement.

"Haven't you forgotten about that beastly cat yet?" he asked.

"No," said the girl. "I have not. And it isn't a beastly cat; it's been ill-treated, and that's why it's so wild. But when you get to know it, it's a dear."

"Perhaps if you got to know me, I should turn out to be so bad, either," said the man soberly. "But a fellow gets a bit rough if he lives in places like this all his life. I haven't spoken to a lady for months!"

The girl said nothing.

THROUGH the half-open door behind her the ugly, thin body of the cat had thrust itself, and now it came close to the girl, rubbing its head against her skirts.

She looked down at it.

"You see?" she said triumphantly to the man. "She's not a bit wild with me now!"

He followed the direction of her eyes.

"Oh, I didn't mean to hurt the creature—only to use steel from my room. Puss, puss!"

He stooped, holding one hand to the cat conciliatingly.

There was a second's silence, during which the rusty purring stopped abruptly, the thin back grew arched, and then with a fierce spitting sound the cat flew back to the shelter of the girl's room.

The man stood up; he looked annoyed.

"Ungrateful beast!" he said boyishly coloring.

The girl smiled.

They walked down the narrow stairs together, the man a few steps behind.

"I'm not anything," he told her; "but I always imagine that some day I am going to get the Thames on fire by writing a book that will be sold out in less than a week, or something like that. Meantime, I am starving—more or less," he added conscientiously.

"Fame is a long time coming to some people," said the girl. She thought of a drawer full of manuscripts in the room upstairs—rejected manuscripts, all of them—and it was cheering to know that somebody else besides herself was hoping on in spite of defeat.

"They're out in the street now, and without asking, the man fell into step beside her.

"I am going in for that first novel competition the Curwen Publishing Company are offering," he said confidentially. "If only I could get that prize, the rest would be easy. It's a hundred pound prize; and look what it would mean afterwards—look at the advertisement!"

"Yes"—the girl looked at him—"yes," she repeated. "I—"

She broke off. "I dare say there are ever so many people going in for it, who want to win quite as much as you do," she said half-resentfully.

He did not answer.

They were at the corner now, where the dreary street which sheltered the ugliness of the third-rate boarding-house joined the busy main thoroughfare.

The girl hailed a passing 'bus.

"Goodby," she said.

He looked rather disappointed, and the girl smiled, as she might have done at a disappointed child.

"I am glad I didn't tell him," the girl thought, as she climbed to a seat on the top of the 'bus. "He seemed so hopeful, and, after all, only one of us can win the prize."

THE girl had been kept late at the office.

The particularly flourishing company promoter who paid her the munificent salary of five-and-twenty shillings a week for taking down his seductively worded letters in shorthand and typewriting them afterward, had seen fit to require her

services for an extra three hours that evening; and as she closed the door behind her she lifted to her lips a bunch of sweet-scented violets she held in her hand. Overhead she could hear the steps of the man from whom she had just parted on the stairs outside.

He loved her—she was quite sure of it now—though he had not told her so, unless his eyes had spoken for him when he bade her "good night," unless the kiss he had left on her hand had carried straight to her heart a message of all that he would some day tell her himself.

She stooped her flushed face to the soft head of the old cat, which had climbed on to the table to gently obtrude its rusty welcome, and kissed its peaked face.

He loved me, old woman," she whispered; "and now you will just have to make friends with him, too, to please me, because—perhaps—if he wins the competition—well, who knows what will happen! Then her eyes fell on the letter, lying in the circle of yellow lamplight.

She stood up slowly, with a little thrill at her heart; then she put out a hand reluctantly, as one might do to a repulsive object, and took it up.

Overhead the man's steps were silent.

The girl broke the seal slowly, and drew out the inclosure.

But she knew its contents before she read them. Somehow, all along, she had been sure that it would come, this letter—come with just such news—such good news, as it would have been two months ago; but now—

She thought of the man's eyes, as he had looked at her when he bade her "Good night," and she thought of his words:

"My luck has turned now; I am sure of it—sure—and soon, in a few days, I shall be able to tell you all that I must not tell you now."

She knew what he was thinking of, and she had asked him half fearfully: "And if you do not win? If somebody else should?"

And he had interrupted her, almost angrily, fiercely.

"You must not say that! I shall win! I must! I have counted on it; so nobody else can need to win so much as I do!"

And now! She looked down at the letter in her hand.

"Dear Madam—I have great pleasure in informing you that you have won the prize of one hundred pounds offered by Messrs. Curwen & Co. in the First Novel Competition, your novel—

"The Solitary Way"—being adjudged the best. We are, madam, yours faithfully,

"JOHN WEBB."

"For Messrs. Curwen & Co."

The girl put the letter down mechanically, and stood staring before her, pale-faced.

She had not even told him that she wrote. She had been shyly ashamed to tell him that she had dared to compete for the prize. And, besides, had he not often spoken of his dislike for women who wrote?—so often expressed the wish that she did not have to work for her own living?

And now—oh! was ever success more unwelcome—ever so unwillingly received!

She had deceived him—ever so unwittingly—but still, it had been deceit.

She had listened to his hopes, shared them with him; and yet, all the time, deep in her own heart had been a presentiment that was almost a dread that this would happen.

Why, oh why, had she not told him?

She shivered as she looked down at the letter.

At first I never thought I should win it. I never wanted to after I knew you. Then I was afraid to tell you—

The man looked at her. His face was white and there was a cold, cruel look in his eyes, which reminded her of the night he had thrown a book at the cat—the night she had first seen him.

"I must congratulate you," he said, and his voice was harsh. "I must congratulate you. You must have enjoyed many a laugh at my expense. I will wish you 'Good night.'"

The girl's tears dried in a sudden scorching flush.

"You are going?" she asked.

"Yes," said the man. "I will wish you 'Good night.'"

The door opened and shut again between them.

The girl stood where he had left her for a moment, staring at the closed door, then she laughed hysterically.

"I might have known," she told herself. "I might have known."

A soft paw touched her hand as she stood leaning heavily against the table; a soft head was thrust against her wrist.

Turning, she saw the old cat pushing itself against her, heard its rusty purr. She stooped, gathering the little friendless creature in her arms, burying her wet face in its fur.

"You love me better than he does, Old Woman," she said, trying to laugh. Then she broke down.

THE man stood back mechanically as the fire engine came dashing around the corner, the horses straining, the men shouting.

He looked after it with uninterested, weary eyes.

The London streets were very quiet—almost deserted—and the sudden rush and thunder of the engine seemed to break the night stillness with terrific force and to leave it the more deadly silent as the clang and the shouting died away, swallowed up in the heart of the sleeping city.

He was footsore and weary, but he was hardly conscious of it, for his heart and brain felt numb.

He had built for himself a castle and had fallen about him, for its foundation had been nothing but a slender hope, and the great wind of disappointment had come sweeping along over its battlements and had thrown them down.

He had been beaten in the struggle for success and happiness by a woman—a woman he loved.

He had dreamed of a time when he could lift from her shoulders the burden she carried, when he could take away the necessity for her to work—when, with his own mightiness, he could make enough for them

His eyes were upon her, but she would not lift her own, and her hand was cold in his.

He loosened her suddenly.

"You are tired out. What a selfish beast I am, keeping you standing out here. Good night."

"Good night," said the girl. She opened her door. Instantly there was a delighted little "meow" from within, and a soft thud as the cat dropped from a chair to the floor.

The girl stooped and lifted the cat in her arms.

"I love her," she said, her soft face against the cat's head, "because, like me, she's alone in the world, with nobody else to love her."

The man made a sudden movement, but checked himself.

"Good night," he said, almost roughly, as he turned away and climbed the stairs again to his own room.

THREE days later, when the girl came home from the office, a typewritten letter lay on her table in the circle of yellow lamplight.

She did not see it at first; there was a soft flush on her cheeks and a



"A MAN WITH A WOMAN CLUTCHED TIGHT TO HIS BREAST AS HE TOPPLED FORWARD."

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both, and she had listened and smiled.

And now she had quietly and unassumingly done what he had meant to do—and had won with a word the thing he had lost in spite of all his optimistic boasting.

In that moment when he had looked at her before he shut the door between them he had almost hated her. All that was cruel and brutal in him had come uppermost when he saw the tears in her eyes, heard her words.

He panted. "There's a back way, out on to the roof. Let me go! I must save her. I tell you I will go!"

He broke away from those who would have held him. He felt free to the ground, and now he was free to risk his life in that seething, burning cauldron—where she was, the girl he loved; the girl whose forgiveness she had yet to ask. How could he let her die to death when she had not forgiven him? How could he live if it were too late now to ask her pardon?

Outside the crowd waited with suspended breath.

"They're lost, sure enough," said a man solemnly, and a woman at his side began to sob.

Then suddenly a wild shout went up from a hundred throats. A rush forward was made, a score of willing hands were stretched to the blackened, scorched figure of a man that staggered and reeled through the burning doorway—a man with a woman clutched tight to his breast as he toppled forward.

"I've got the cat, too," he said thickly. "They were both on the stairs. It scratched me, the beast; but I've brought them both out."

He laughed stupidly, lurched and fell heavily to the ground.

THE room was so dark when the man entered that for a moment he stood blinking uncertainly before he saw the girl lying on a sofa by the window, propped up by pillows.

He went forward then and stood beside her silently.

She was awake, her eyes open, smiling up at him.

"Please don't look so frightened," she said weakly. "I'm nearly well now." She lifted one bandaged hand from the cushion.

"It's only this," she said.

"Your right hand," said the man hoarsely.

"Yes," she said, laid it back on the quilt with a little breath that sounded like a sigh. "It might have been so much worse," she added bravely. "I might never have got out at all if you hadn't come. It was so terrible. I tried to get down those stairs, but the cat was struggling so." She shivered.

"She scratched me when I tried to pick her up," said the man. "Even then, you see, she could not forget her hatred of me." He laughed a little mirthlessly.

"I have told her that she is to be friends with you," said the girl. "I think, she quite understands. Puss, puss."

There was a faint stir from a cushion at the foot of the couch, and a faint apologetic "Meow" as the old white cat rose stiffly and shambled along the quilt to the girl.

The girl's eyes challenged the man to laugh.

"Speak to her," he commanded.

The man stretched his hand across the couch gingerly.

"Puss."

The animal looked at him, opened its mouth to spit, but apparently changed its mind and sat motionless with flattened ears submitting to the touch of his hand.

"You see," said the girl triumphantly.

The man stood upright again, frowning.

"I did not come here to make friends with the cat," he said. "I came to—"

He broke off, then suddenly he dropped on his knees beside the